DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 605 FL 017 537

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TITLE International Teaching Assistant Training Seminar at Arizona State University.
INSTITUTION Arizona State Univ., Tempe. Communication Research Center.
PUB DATE Feb 88
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (San Diego, CA, February 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Course Content; Cultural Education; English (Second Language); *Foreign Students; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Language Skills; Microteaching; Program Evaluation; Seminars; *Teacher Education; *Teaching Assistants; *Teaching Skills; Training Objectives
IDENTIFIERS *Arizona State University

ABSTRACT

Arizona State University has developed a seminar to train foreign graduate students as teaching assistants. The course meets for three hours once a week, and focuses on three content or skill areas: language improvement, cultural issues, and teaching strategies. Each student must prepare at least four microteaching presentations to be videotaped and evaluated by the students, instructor, and outside experts. The program centralizes information and skill training for this group, but is intended only to enhance and not replace departmental training. It emphasizes small group work and benefits from interdepartmental cooperation. The program's major limitation is the lack of followup from the seminar. While observation of the trainees would be valuable for teacher certification and program improvement, it would also take considerable time. An additional drawback is that the seminar does not carry credit, but must be taken in addition to a full-time graduate program and any other student work. The seminar has been found to be effective in improving oral communication and teaching skills among international teaching assistants, thereby contributing to improved teaching. (MSE)

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INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANT TRAINING SEMINAR AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Paper presented at the Western Speech Communication Association Conference, San Diego, California, February, 1988.

FL017537

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The purpose of this paper is to describe briefly the history, purpose, training design, strengths, and limitations of the international teaching assistant training seminar at Arizona State University.

History

The International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Training Seminar began in Fall, 1981 as a joint effort of the University Program for Faculty Development (UPFD), the ASU Department of Communication, and the then English Skills Program (now American Language and Culture Program--ALCP). The training program was requested by the Departments of Mathematics, Physics and Engineering which had a high concentration of international teaching assistants (ITAs) and had received complaints from American students about the poor language and communication skills of ITAs.

In 1985, ALCP conducted a survey of 28 institutions seeking information on ITA testing and training programs across the country. Based on the information from the survey, evaluation of our training seminars, and ideas gained from a National Association of Foreign Students Affairs (NAFSA) seminar on ITA training, major changes in the ITA testing and training program were proposed at ASU.

In August 1985, ASU adopted a policy on ITA testing and training which mandates all international TA applicants to achieve a certain score on the Test of Spoken English (TSE) or SPEAK test before assuming teaching responsibilities. Provisions are made for those whose scores are close to certification to enroll in the ITA Training Seminar (ITATS). The ITATS helped those students to improve their communication and teaching skills and thereby achieve full or limited certification to teach at ASU. Since 1985, the ITA Training Seminar has been conducted by the American Language and Culture Program and is funded by the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. This centralized funding has provided stability to the overall program.

Purpose of the Training Seminar

The purpose of the ITA Training Seminar is to improve the spoken English skills and teaching effectiveness of international teaching assistants. The seminar addresses three issues: (1) language improvement, (2) cultural issues as they pertain to education, and (3) teaching strategies. The ITA Training Seminar does not replace departmental TA training, but rather is designed to address the special needs of international students whose expectations of themselves as instructors may differ from the expectations of the American students they teach.

Training Design

The ITA Training Seminar is open to any graduate student who has an assistantship pending and who has scored between 190 and 225 on the Test of Spoken English (TSE) before coming to the United States or the SPEAK test upon arrival at ASU. The seminar meets for three hours each week. As indicated earlier, the seminar includes three content/skills areas:

1. Language improvement--the focus is on pronunciation and oral communication skills; language improvement is done in small groups in the one-hour weekly tutorials.

2. Cultural issues--the focus is on acculturation and cultural awareness to increase students' understanding of cultural values, norms, and expectations as they pertain to education and the classroom; this part of the seminar is done through lecture, discussions, exercises, case studies, role playing, and readings.

3. Teaching strategies--the focus is on teaching methods, question-answer techniques, and other pedagogical skills; this part of the seminar is discussed with the entire seminar group.

Each seminar participant is required to prepare at least four micro-teaching presentations to be videotaped and evaluated by the students, by the instructor, and/or by outside experts.

Program Strengths

The ITA Training Program at ASU is a model program in many ways. A major strength is that the program is centralized and provides needed information and skill training to TA's from many different countries and from all colleges at the university. The ITA training seminar is meant to enhance, not replace, departmental TA training. ALCP does not presume to know the

specifics of teaching physics or art or political science but rather deals with the problems international students have in common. A Chinese TA in Chemistry is likely to have more problems in common with a Chinese TA in psychology than s/he will have with an American TA in Chemistry.

Another strength of the program is the small group work. Although the small groups require a lot of time both in class and in preparation for class, we believe the groups are an invaluable way to work on individual problem areas and to build TA confidence as well.

Still another strength of the program is the videotaping that is done throughout the semester. Each TA is taped at least four times and these tapes are evaluated by the student, by other students, by the instructor, by other ESL professionals, and by representatives of the TA's department, usually the department chair or graduate advisor. The value of videotaping gives ample meaning to the phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words..."

An additional benefit of the ITA Training Program is the inter-departmental cooperation that has resulted from the regular contact between department offices and the ALCP. The lines of communication between ALCP and many of the academic departments have been established and are often utilized.

Program Limitations

The major limitation of the program is the lack of follow-up for the seminar. Once a student completes the program, no one is

responsible for any follow-up activities: teaching observation, additional language work, evaluation of program effectiveness, and so forth. For instance, of the 33 ITA's to complete the program in one year, all but two were certified to teach. Observations of 31 TA's would take a considerable amount of time, but would provide valuable information on past effectiveness and future improvements that could be made in the program. One department has, in fact, requested that ALCP observe seven TA's who received certification with qualifications over the previous two years. This department would like to require full certification for all TA's in the department. Observing these TA's now, two years after completing the training, would provide us with more information on the effectiveness of the training.

The other weakness is the issue of credit. Since the ITA Training Seminar carries no credit, the students in the program must take this seminar in addition to their full-time graduate program. Many of them teach or work on campus as well.

Summary

We are pleased with the progress ITA Training Seminar has made over the last seven years at ASU. The seminar has been very effective in improving oral communication and teaching skills of international teaching assistants and thus has made a contribution to improving undergraduate instruction at ASU. This paper has described a case study of an innovative training program designed to improve effective use of spoken English (as a

second language) by international teaching assistants. In this sense, ITA Training Seminar adds a new dimension to ESL training. We hope that this paper will stimulate further research, discussion and innovation in this relatively new and exciting dimension of ESL.

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